

S A N F R A N C I S C O

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Voice of tolerance, rights

BY NINA WU

Of The Examiner Staff

Rep. Michael Honda, D-San Jose, represents California's 15th Congressional District. He was a Peace Corps volunteer, schoolteacher, principal, appointee to the San Jose City Planning Commission and state Assemblyman before holding his current post. Honda, a Japanese American who spent his childhood in internment camps, is a strong voice for social justice, tolerance and civil rights.

Nina Wu: Would you support a resolution authorizing President Bush to use force against Saddam Hussein's regime?

Mike Honda: If it's without working with the U.N. and getting consensus, no. He's got to have a plan, he's got to have evidence, he should go to the U.N., and he's got to come to Congress. Then, when he comes to Congress, we'll look at it. Then we can start debating the issue.

Q: On the other hand, you did support military strikes in Afghanistan.

A: That was the resolution for the president to move forward on the war on terrorism. Yes, I voted for that because it was narrow, it was precise and it was a resolution of the Congress.

It was determined by both parties in Congress to allow the president to go forward. The president wanted a blank check to go in there, but Congress never gives the president a blank check. Not even during World War II.

Q: You spoke out against hate crimes targeting the Muslim community following the 9/11 attacks.

A: Muslims were targeted, Sikhs were targeted, Hindus were targeted, Mexicans were targeted, people with dark skin were targeted, women who wore shawls on their head were targeted. So a whole group of people was targeted based on what a group of terrorists did, and that's not right.

So the message is this -- that the Constitution is never tested in times of tranquility. It's always tested in times of tension, trauma and that's why people have to remain as rational as possible.

If they really believe in the Constitution, they have to hold by it no matter how anxious they are.

Q: What would you consider the most important lesson about the WWII internment camps?

A: The country needs to understand this was a violation of civil rights. Japanese Americans themselves were a little reticent about the whole issue -- why do this now? It's water under the bridge.

But once they began to understand that there is a principle behind this and a lesson to be learned, it became an American lesson, not a Japanese-American lesson, that we have to hold on to these principles.

Q: At the same time, you're authoring a bill that would support reparations for American military POWs who were forced into slave labor for Japanese companies.

A: That's the bill I really care about, because it contains the same principles -- that our prisoners of war were utilized as slave laborers and that Japanese companies at that time were unduly enriched by slave labor.

Our veterans should have the right to pull these companies into court to seek redress.

Q: What is your position on medical marijuana?

A: Well, medical marijuana in the state of California is law.

Q: How do we reconcile federal law with state law?

A: I support the state law because generally, we're much more progressive than the rest of the country.

Q: You want to tell them that at Congress?

A: Sure I do. Let's face it. Look at the water standards. The federal standards for water quality are much lower than the state of California.

Air-quality standards are much lower federally than the state of California.

We set higher standards for the quality of life for the people of our state.

Q: You were in the Peace Corps in El Salvador. Did that shape your perspective?

A: Tremendously. Peace Corps has not only shaped my life. It helped me understand many things I would never have learned if I had just stayed in this country.

It taught me a new language and culture, new insight into poverty and what government can and cannot do.

Q: Are you confident that by 2012, BART will be an effective transportation system reaching down to San Jose and Santa Clara?

A: By 2012, I hope we have a system we all dreamed of. All of us are working diligently and concertedly to make sure we get the funding to move forward toward that end.

We were successful getting preliminary clearance for the FTA, which is critical in saving a lot of money and stepping forward ahead of the schedule.